New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Love for Love"

"Portrait in Black"

Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK TIMES

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"Love for Love"

New York Post

MAY 27, 1947

Gielgud Is Brilliant In Congreve Comedy

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The accomplished Mr. Gielgud did it again last night. Directing and playing with style and brilliance, he brought to the Royale Theatre his highly praised London production of Congreve's "Love for Love," and let us see it for the masterpiece of sardonic, artificial comedy that it is. Once more it was demonstrated, as in the case of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," that a famous contemplation of the idiosyncracies of British manners, from the stage's historic past, can still be great fun in the theatre, particularly if it was written by a playwright with an Irish background and directed by John Gielgud.

It must be acknowledge at the start that the 250-year-old "Love for Love" does not contain as much charm and fun for a modern audience as the comparatively contemporary Wilde comedy, and that it hasn't quite the acting style possessed by the recent production of "The Importance of Being Earnest." For us, the Congreve play does drag at times, and there are moments when it fails to seem properly amusing. This is virtually mere quibbling, however, because there is so much grace, laughter and verbal beauty in "Love for Love" that for most of the time it is a civilized delight.

Congreve and Wilde

Comparisons and contrasts with Wilde are somehow inevitable in writing about last night's proceedings, in part because "The Importance of Being Earnest" supplied the most memorably delightful evening of the season, and, also, because of the inherent similarities between two such famous examples of the artificial comedy of manners. But there is one striking difference between them. Wilde's play, for all its perversity of epigram and sentiment, does possess a strangely romantic heart. The Congreve comedy has no heart at all.

This, it may be added at once, is not necessarily a harsh criticism of it. "Love for Love" assuredly does very well without such an organ, making up for it by the abundance of that grace, laughter and verbal beauty already mentioned. Its seventeenth-century world of rakes and cuckolds, where every man and woman is deceitful and every husband is deceived, is unashamedly callous and cruel, and its conversation is rather monotonously devoted to sex, but everyone talks with such wit, imagination and literary craft that it would require an excessively moralistic observer to object to such brilliantly artificial comedy creation.

Those Names

Perhaps the most unnecessary thing in the world would be to tell the plot of "Love for Love." Anyway, the questionable love between Valentine and Angelica runs its rough course amid the devious schemes of characters called Scandal, Tattle, Mrs. Frail, Foresight, Sir Sampson Legend, and Buckram, the lawyer, whose chief sin is that their names gave bad ideas of nomenclature to the author of "Barefoot Boy With Cheek," but the important matters to speak of here are the Gielgud direction, the admirable settings and costumes, and the acting.

Although Mr. Gielgud is excellent as Valentine, his is far from the most effective role in the comedy, and all of the supporting cast is good. Cyril Ritchard, who was in Gielgud's London production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," is particularly helpful as the foolish Scandal, and so are Pamela Brown as Angelica, Richard Wordsworth as Valentine's knowing servant, Malcolm Keen as the heavy father and Robert Flemyng as Ben, the noisy sailor. There should also be a word for Adrianne Allen and Marian Spencer as dubious ladies and for Jessie Evans, whose fine rowdiness as a country girl recalls Joyce Redman's wonderful Doll Tearsheet in the Old Vic production of "Henry IV." The visiting English are in fine form.

'LOVE FOR LOVE.'

Comedy by William Congreve; staged by John Gielgud; settings by Rex Whistler; costumes by Joannetta Cochrane; lighting by William Conway; presented by the Theater Guild and John C. Wilson, in association with H. M. Tennant, Ltd., of London, at the Royale Theater, Monday evening, May 26, 1947. The cast:

Valentine	John Gielgud
Jeremy	Richard Wordsworth
Scandal	George Hayes
Tattle	Cyril Ritchard
Mrs. Frail	Adrianne Allen
Foresight	John Kidd
Robin	Donald Bain
Nurse	Philippa Gill
Angelica	Pamela Brown
Sir Sampson Legend	Malcolm Keen
Mrs. Foresight	Marian Spencer
Miss Prue	Jessie Evans
Ben	Robert Flemyng
Buckram	Sebastian Cabot
Jenny	Mary Lynn

SYNOPSIS: The Scene is London—1695. Act 1—Scene 1—Valentine's lodgings. Morning. Scene 2—Foresight's house. The same day. Scene 3—The same. The same evening. Act 2—Scene 1—Valentine's lodgings. The next morning. Scene 2—Foresight's house. Later in the day.

New York World-Telegram

MAY 27, 1947

'Love for Love' Bawdy But Brittle in Revival

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The proposition of seeing "Love for Love," by William Congreve, as of seeing any Restoration play, suggests an evening of good-natured bawdy conversation and a whirl of intrigue moving with brittle intricacy.

John Gielgud's production of the play, which opened last night to a most distinguished audience, proved that it needs a wealth of comic invention to keep it more than intermittently amusing in this day and age.

The play seems to be done with an awesome fidelity to tradition that would undoubtedly appeal more to a British audience than an American one. Here and now it seems bloodless, and only here and there funny.

There is a maze of plot about various love affairs that has no particular point beyond excusing a series of epigrammatic remarks couched in the free language of courtship in the 17th Century.

Artificial Romances.

Some of these speeches are crystal-clear and brilliantly amusing. Others have the humor of bald frankness. The artificial romances, appropriate as they may be to the period, have a way of going home the long way round and distending the space between the bright peaks.

In all honesty it should be said that "The Importance of Being Earnest," which Mr. Gielgud's company treated so brilliantly, is mighty tough to follow.

The star is a courtly hero, ay with the comment that needs a leer, and sure of the bravura of his mad scenes. A bitterness that makes his character real burns in his love scene with Angelica.

Cyril Ritchard as the foppish satyr Tattle, brings an energetic style to all his scenes. His vigor and sustained manner make many of the other players colorless. Not so however, the Prue of Jessie Evans, whom he teaches about romance far too successfully for his own comfort.

Bumptious and Punchy.

Miss Evans plays a bumptious maid with a whole hearted broadness that picks the play up and whirls it in the air. Her approach is athletic and punchy, but her eagerness is real whether mad, glad or sad.

Robert Flemyng contributes another full-blooded portrait as the sailor Ben who almost gets a fortune and a wife. He brings a lusty sea-going freedom into the drawing room, and with a clear-cut, effective idea of what he is up to, makes his presence felt every moment he is on the stage.

Pamela Brown shows again a dewey gracefulness and a rare sense of elegance. As Angelica she has style, warmth and strength.

Adrianne Allen is a handsome Mrs. Frail, opportunist with her affections, who aims at many men and gets one she would least like to have. As her sister, Mrs. Foresight, Marian Spencer has a particularly lovely moment at the end of the first act as she hints an invitation to an extra-marital romance.

As Jeremy, the servant of Valentine, Richard Wordsworth gives a dexterous picture of a cunning, though good humored rogue.

Since "Love for Love" is a talky play it could do with more physical vibrancy than it gets here. Proof of this lies in the fact that so many of the really memorable moments are those that are pictorial for their agility.

One remembers with delight and some relief Miss Evans' headlong dive at Mr. Ritchards and her flight from him, Mr. Ritchards' mincing off stage with his ridiculous muff, and Mr. Gielgud's desperate antics with a blanket during his mad orations.

Journal-American

MAY 27, 1947

Lunatic Interlude Features Classic

By ROBERT GARLAND

Admitting, but half-heartedly, that last night's reproduction of "Love For Love" is among the best I've seen, it'll take more than (and I quote) John Gielgud and his distinguished company (unquote) to convince me that this William Congreve classic is a very fine or a very funny play.

It has some better, brighter moments. But they're unhappily infrequent, and the soiled string of make-believe which holds them haphazardly together is adequate without being entertaining. More often than not, the Restoration roughhouse sags beneath its weight of wigs and wordage.

It's too late in the season (and, here and now, the evening) to take Burns Mantle from his shelf, dust him off and discover where and when, if not exactly why, "Love For Love" has been previously revived, who wore the wigs, who spoke the words therein. But it's not been often.

I do remember seeing it at the Greenwich Village Theatre with Walter Abel and Adrienne Morrison on-stage. And you, perhaps, recall The Players' revival seven years ago with a truly all-star cast and a prologue and epilogue written memorably for the occasion by Charles Hanson Towne.

• • •

Complications Grow

Turning back to schooldays, "Love For Love's" the one in which Angelica, with a fortune of her own, pretends disloyalty, and Valentine, who loves her beyond his means, pretends madness in an effort to outwit Sir Sampson, a late Seventeenth Century ignobleman of London.

This, in school or out, takes lengthy doing, involving Jeremy, a comic servant; Scandal, a catty gossip; Tattle, a swishy idler; Foresight, an asinine astrologist; Prue, a country cut-up; Ben, a sexful seaman; Buckram, a light-fingered lawyer and Mrs. Frail, a lady of the evening.

These act and react, one against the other, and the complications which ensue grow more and more unwieldy. And sex, having raised its not unattractive head early in the proceedings, remains so persistently on view that it, too, dies a natural death beneath those wigs and wordage.

But, at the final curtain, to music made up by Leslie Bridgewater, everyman gets everywoman and even Tattle, the swishy idler, makes up his mind. But the going's been uneven, with the dull tarnishing the bright and only Valentine's "mad scene" outstanding.

• • •

Hamlet Burlesque

It's easy to see why John Gielgud picked the role of Valentine for his own. In the lunatic interlude which highlights the final stanza at the Royale, Mr. Gielgud has himself a high and mighty time burlesqueing the Hamlet which, in 1936, came vividly to life at our own Empire Theatre.

A higher and mightier time is had by Cyril Ritchard, whose chichi Tattle is unerringly projected. Pamela Brown is a well-spoken, if colorless, Angelica. Adrianne Allen brings more reality to Mrs. Frail, the lovely lady of the town. Thanks to Jessie Evans, Prue is Sis Hopkins with an English accent.

There's little wrong with the other members of John Gielgud's imported players. They wear the wigs supplied by Mr. Gielgud's Repertory Theatre, speak the lines supplied by Mr. Gielgud's William Congreve and go through the actorial paces supplied by Mr. Gielgud's own direction. A Mr. Goldie even sings.

If this, plus Rex Whistler's complementary settings, add up to no more than a mild mannered theatrical adventure, that's exactly what "Love For Love" at the Royale turns out to be. Personally, I wish Mr. Gielgud had seen fit to bring us his Hamlet, his Richard or his Noah.

DAILY NEWS

MAY 27, 1947

Gielgud's 'Love for Love' Makes A Happy Ending for the Season

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In bringing Congreve's "Love for Love" to the Royale Theatre, John Gielgud and his good companions have put a deft and delightful finishing touch upon the theatrical season.

We can scatter now, we habitual playgoers, to our various Summer pursuits and recall with pleasure our final evening of entertainment. It has not always been thus with the last week of May; too often some hopeful Summer turkey has appeared only to drop dead and be put away, unmourned, by Decoration Day.

As he did with "The Importance of Being Earnest," Mr. Gielgud has cast and directed "Love for Love" with intelligence and distinction. It is a much older comedy, in an older manner, than Wilde's hard-surfaced, brilliantly polished work. It is witty enough, and pleasantly naughty, but a more leisurely and florid affair.

I am no expert on how a Restoration comedy should be played, not having been old enough to attend the theatre in the late Seventeenth Century—but it seems to me that Mr. Gielgud and his fellow players have done everything just about right. The ladies all look fetching in their period gowns, and the gentlemen fuss and primp in their Mary Pickford wigs, fancy jackets and—yes, really—fur muffs. They all look the way I think Restoration should look.

And they all act, most engagingly, down to the very least of the fifteen players in the company. Their enthusiasm for artful impersonation enlivens the duller of Congreve's passages and gives sparkle to his raffish romances and his amusement at human frailty. The two greatest monsters in the world, he says, are a man and a woman—but they are quite charming monsters.

Mr. Gielgud is Valentine, the young man who feigns madness in order to win the girl he loves and to dissuade his father from cutting him off with a pittance. Again he is playing with grace and humor. Pamela Brown, as the girl, makes an ideal team-mate, being keen of wit and full of grace.

Bobby Played it, too.

Among the broader impersonations is a hilarious one by Jessie Evans as a girl who is equally crazy over lollipops and sex. The scene in which Cyril Ritchard, as Tattle, instructs her in the art of civilized dalliance is a happy affair, for Mr. Ritchard's is perhaps the fattest role in the play and this is his most amusing scene.

Adrianne Allen returns to these shores as Mrs. Frail, a most agreeable lady; John Kidd, who was the minister in "Earnest," now is a doddering astrologer, and young Richard Wordsworth, who has a very small bit as a manservant in the Wilde comedy, now has a considerable and nicely played role as another manservant.

I did not see Bobby Clark as Ben, the lusty sailor, in the Players' revival of seven Springs ago, but I have now seen Robert Flemyng do the part and am quite content. Mr. Flemyng is funny even in the moments when one cannot quite understand his seagoing accent. I guess we haven't had enough Seventeenth Century tars around lately to be up on their talk.

The season is ending most pleasantly—and this report should end pleasantly, too, with words of appreciation for Malcolm Keen's Sir Sampson and George Hayes' Scandal and for the sets and costumes by Rex Whistler and Jeannetta Cochrane.

Daily Mirror

MAY 27, 1947

'Love for Love' Is Good, Rowdy Fun

By ROBERT COLEMAN

John Gielgud's production of William Congreve's "Love for Love," which the Theatre Guild and John C. Wilson brought to the Royale Theatre last evening, is inferior to his earlier, just about perfect "The Importance of Being Earnest." But it's good, rowdy, ribald, roughhouse fun.

In staging Congreve, Gielgud hasn't maintained the uniformity of style which made his Wilde revival such a joy. He has shown a tendency to sacrifice character for situation laughs, brittle glitter for robust burlesque.

Of the large acting company Cyril Ritchard comes off best as the simpering, mannered, effetely elegant Tattle. His would be a gorgeous Tattle in any revival, and, in this one, it shines like a powerful lighthouse facing a tumultous sea.

Gielgud gives recent converts to the drama an idea of what he was like in "Hamlet" with his mad scene, which is a satiric version of his melancholy Dane of fond memory. He strikes classic attitudes and reads eloquently, though with a twinkle in eye.

Gielgud's most honest and effective moments, however, come at the end when he pleads the wastrel Valentine's seemingly lost cause before the coquettish, wealthy and hard-to-win Angelica.

Pamela Brown is an excellent, if not brilliant, Angelica. And she keeps reminding us of a tony Mae West, because of a nasal quality in her voice.

An especial citation should go to Malcolm Keen for his vital, explosive, unscrupulous Sir Sampson Legend. His is good, solid character acting. Adrianne Allen, too, should be singled out for her flirtatious, conscienceless Mrs. Frail.

Robert Flemyng, usually a top-flight actor, goes aground on the dramatic shoals that surround the uncouth seaman, Ben. Flemyng, blusters, expectorates and gives the impression of being a fairly competent member of an amateur acting society.

Jessie Evans plays the country bumpkin, Miss Prue, as if she thought her Doll Tearsheet on the water wagon. It is just such an interpretation of the role as might be given by Violet Carlson or Betty Hutton. We never could quite make out just what John Kidd thought he was about as Foresight.

Oh, yes, there are capable performances by George Hayes, as Scandal: Marian Spencer, as Mrs. Foresight, and Richard Wordsworth, as Jeremy.

Among the production's other assets are the elaborate settings by Rex Whistler and the costumes by Jeannetta Cochrane.

The first nighters appeared to be having a good time at the Royale. They were generous with their applause, and one lady, on exiting, was overheard to say:

"It's quite, quite wonderful. So enjoyable."

And now a note of warning for conservative parents. Leave the children at home when you see "Love for Love." Congreve wasn't writing for the kiddies when he penned this bawdy, frank comedy about infidelity and greed.

PM Exclusive

MAY 28, 1947

Kronenberger

Gielgud Gives New Life To a 252-Year-Old Play

Once more John Gielud has put us in his debt. His *Love For Love* is stylish and spirited, and infinitely more of a stage piece than a waxwork. If it isn't so brilliant an achievement as was Mr. Gielgud's *Importance of Being Earnest*, it plainly didn't offer him so brilliant an opportunity. This is not to damn it out of hand as the inferior play. But being 200 years older than *Earnest*, it is a little more garrulous, a little stiffer in the joints. Thanks to having been written in 1695, it includes, for example, an old codger interested (as his original audience was) in astrology: for a present-day audience, he is merely an unutterable bore. But it is not age alone that makes Congreve's play less rewarding, production-wise, than Wilde's. There is also the fact that Congreve's cannot quite be acted all in one style, and so cannot seem so great an achievement in sheer style.

• • •

Artistically, *Love For Love* cannot hold a candle to Congreve's *Way of the World* which is, without any doubt whatever, the finest stage comedy in the English language. Yet it is not hard to understand why *The Way of the World* has generally failed in the theater, and *Love For Love* has so many times succeeded. *The Way of the World* is marvelously high-bred, but a little low-pitched. The very thing that makes *Love For Love* a lesser play—its streak of very broad comedy—makes it infinitely more playable. Without boorish Ben and hoydenish Miss Prue—without, for that matter, the more farcical moments of Valentine's feigned madness and the less corseted moments of virtually everybody's sex life—*Love For Love* would have a far grander air; but it would prove, I fear, much duller company.

Yet, if no patrician comedy of manners like *The Way of the World*, *Love For Love* is not mere Restoration bawdry, either. It too is concerned with manners, and even with manner. However often its bedroom doors may open and shut, all its worldlier characters speak to perfection the language of the drawing-room. It is, indeed, their speech that matters most. In the artificial style, there has never been a greater master of polished and witty dialogue than Congreve. Often, no doubt, his lines are too literary to have naturalness; but they never lack consummate ease.

• • •

Obviously, how to speak such lines is something of a problem; as is how to play such roles. Americans generally can't: when they're not being too prosaic, they're being too elegantly mincing and mannered; they're choking all the life out of the play through attempting a way of life. The English usually know better. They can achieve a very real elegance on occasion, but they don't confuse it with enervation; and what they most go after is a certain aplomb. That distinguished Mr. Gielgud's *Importance of Being Earnest*; it distinguishes his *Love For Love*. Moreover, the frightfully foppish Tattle has it quite as much as the mettlesome Angelica or the insolent Valentine; it is what, more than any other single thing, keeps the play going.

• • •

Love For Love is not the perfectly inlaid production that *Earnest* was able to be, but Mr. Gielgud has staged it skilfully and there are some very good performances. One of these is Mr. Gielgud's own as Valentine; another is the Angelica of Pamela Brown, a pretty fascinating actress; a third the Ben of Robert Flemyng. Other good marks go to Cyril Ritchard, Adrianne Allen, Jessie Evans and George Hayes, among others; and to Rex Whistler for his settings.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"Love for Love"—*continued*

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

MAY 27, 1947

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Gielgud Scores Again

WILLIAM CONGREVE'S "Love For Love" has been given a brilliantly ribald revival by John Gielgud and his excellent company at the Royale. As in his earlier production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," the English actor-manager has struck a happy balance between wit and artifice. The lines of the celebrated Restoration comedy crackle across the stage with a rich bawdy and satirical eloquence. What is more to the point, they are backed up by captivating characterizations and elegant bits of horse-play, two centuries and a half have not withered a lusty show in the current offering.

* * *

Gielgud deserves full credit for a gay and stylish production. In addition to playing the central role of Valentine, who becomes impoverished and counterfeits madness for love of his fair Angelica, he is responsible for a remarkably fluent staging of the classic. There are intervals, to be sure, when Congreve forgot about stage action, or swung to the opposite extreme by complicating his farce until it virtually requires a diagram. They occasion infrequent lulls or periods of confusion at the Royale. The high points of the play, when the half-witted coxcomb, Tattle, is making love to the dumb yokel, Miss Prue, or Valentine is becoming entangled in his pretended lunacy, are rare good fun.

* * *

The star is assisted at every hand by full-bodied and riggish portrayals. Cyril Ritchard is particularly good as a mincing London Lothario of 1695, while George Hayes contributes a sardonic and restrained interpretation of the free-speaker, Scandal. Adrianne Allen is delightful as Mrs. Frail, whose matrimonial schemes land her the least desirable of the beaux at hand; Marian Spencer is decorously wanton as old Foresight's young wife and Pamela Brown is altogether coquettish as the hard-to-get heroine.

Then there is Malcolm Keen, boisterous and paternally remiss as Valentine's hard-hearted father, caricaturing Sir Simpson to the queen's taste. Robert Flemyng is fine as his seafaring younger son, John Kidd is properly ancient as the illiterate and superstitious Foresight, and Jessie Evans is an apple-cheeked and silly Prue. Congreve has been well served by players in the latest revival of his sturdy comedy of manners. The trappings of the piece are in perfect keeping with the material, with handsome settings by the late Rex Whistler and fancy costumes by Jeanetta Cochrane. There are laggard scenes in "Love for Love," but on the whole it is an artful and highly amusing addition to late-season theater going.

The New York Times

MAY 27, 1947

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Congreve's "Love for Love" is a notorious classic, one must naturally speak of it with respect. But Mr. Gielgud and his company, who revived it at the Royale last evening, make it seem inferior to Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," which no one is required to treat with respect. Generally it is polite to pretend that a very old play, which has somehow survived, seems younger than plays of today. But Congreves' artificial comedy, first produced in 1695, seems at least 100 years old now, although Wilde's decorous Victorian prank seems eminently modern.

Nor is the performance of "Love for Love" as perfect a jest. Many of Mr. Gielgud's recent actors have back-tracked with him from Victorian to Restoration. But the performance as a whole lacks the brittle, lacquered uniformity of the previous work. Mr. Gielgud's lack of humor turns Valentine into an ascetic, colorless young man who is burlesquing Shakespeare when he is not acting a prig. Technically, Mr. Gielgud is a brilliant actor. But since he is not playing Congreve artificially, his Valentine emerges as a pleasant, well-mannered young man without much strength of personality—more at home in a library than at Will's coffee house.

* * *

As the director Mr. Gielgud has done better by the other actors than by himself. Adrianne Allen and Marian Spencer, as Mrs. Frail and Mrs. Foresight, respectively, are playing with wit and coquetry; and Pamela Brown, as Angelica, is acting with high style that skilfully separates Congreve from nature. George Hayes' Scandal is nicely mellowed by sin. As the choleric Sir Sampson Legend, the irate, vainglorious parent, Malcolm Keen is playing with good spirit.

In so mincing a comedy, a little hearty playing is always refreshing. Cyril Ritchard's dissembling, fatuous Tattle is capital fooling with its skipping embroidery. Richard Wordsworth's Irish serving rascal is affably humorous. As the blunt and graceless sailor, Robert Flemyng is giving an entertaining performance. As the country-bred daughter, Jessie Evans has a part that can be played broadly. And since long interludes in this "Love for Love" are tedious, the sheer gusto and vulgarity of her acting are gratefully entertaining.

* * *

As an example of dramatic literature, "Love for Love" is sententiously written with an elaborate plot that seems hardly worth so many convolutions. Mr. Gielgud has chastened some of the earthier words, mercifully omitted the sailors' hornpipe and culled out some of the verbosity. Rex Whistler's settings of Restoration London are done with taste, but with less distinction than Jeannetta Cochrane's costumes. Resoration costumes are a designer's holiday.

Despite the licentiousness of Restoration manners, Congreve wrote "Love For Love" with wit and elegance. Mr. Gielgud has taken it too much at face value. He plays Valentine as though he believed in the essential high-mindedness of the character. Perhaps this is the reason why the performance as a whole is so uneven—rueful romance dampening the hard raillery of the Congreve text. The Wilde was better because it was unalloyed make-believe without a single honest word all evening.

The Sun

MAY 27, 1947

'Love for Love' Is a High-spirited Romp, but Gielgud 'Earnest' Was Better.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

John Gielgud and his facile players turned last night to Congreve, to the gay and audacious comedy called "Love for Love," which was put on at the Royale. The Congreve piece is an antique that comes through as a rather high-spirited romp in the playing of these visitors from across the seas.

"Love for Love" was done on the fringes of Greenwich Village two decades ago. In 1940 it was revived when the Players gave the town one of their welcome spring productions, and sagacious casting on that occasion placed the bounding Bobby Clark in the role of Sir Sampson's younger son, Ben, dauntless man of the sea. Now the Theater Guild and John C. Wilson are making the presentation, in association with H. M. Tennent of London's West End.

Congreve's seventeenth century comedy provides an evening of double meanings and farcical situations, of epigrams and stratagems, of sex and sinning, and of the pursuit of the fair Angelica by the insolent Valentine. Not all of "Love for Love" is hilarious. Some of it is dull. There are several scenes that fall little short of being tedious. But it is a comedy classic that has wit and style and charm, and Gielgud's bright people go about the playing in lively fashion.

Gielgud directed and plays Valentine. He doesn't have a great deal to do in "Love for Love"—Wilde served him to greater advantage—but he is again a comedian of skill and gusto. The evening's most fascinating performance is that of Pamela Brown, who was so arch, so airy and so extraordinarily good as the Gwendolyn of "The Importance of Being Earnest." Miss Brown is the fetching Angelica of the proceedings at the Royale, and what an uncommonly good actress she is! Cyril Ritchard is very amusing as the elegant and posturing Tattle. Adrienne Allen gets a lot of spirit into her playing as Mrs. Frail, and so does the equally decorative Marian Spencer as Mrs. Foresight.

Robert Flemyng, who was the magnificent Algy of the Wilde comedy, turns to character acting in the Congreve comedy and makes a hearty sailor of the seabred Ben. There are good performances from Jessie Evans, Philippa Gill and George Hayes. It's a good-looking production in 45th street, with the settings contributed by Rex Whistler and the period costumes by Jeannetta Cochrane.

"Love for Love" is ribald and artificial, a brazen lark that calls for stylized playing and that gets it from the Gielgud cast, but I still prefer these people in "The Importance of Being Earnest." The Congrave comedy offers a generally entertaining evening at the Royale, but it was quite apparent at the first performance that "Love for Love" isn't up to "Earnest" as a play. But what is?

John Gielgud made a graceful speech at the conclusion of last night's festivities.

"Portrait in Black"

PM

MAY 16, 1947

Kronenberger

A Thriller That Needs A Few More Thrills

Murder mysteries are getting to be even rarer on Broadway than good plays. *Portrait in Black*, if the records do not lie, is the theater's first whodunit in six months; and, since it also brings Claire Luce to Broadway for the first time in eight years, one could wish it were a fine bang-up job. But it plainly isn't. It isn't, in fact, quite good enough to pass muster. Though its authors have plotted it in workmanlike fashion, and come up with a couple of suspenseful scenes and taut climaxes, the play as a whole is too low-pitched and draggy. The characters go in for much too much conversation. The waits between wallops are much too extensive.

Actually, *Portrait in Black* is not a whodunit, but a who-saw-it-done? For Matt Talbot, the shipping tycoon, is dead and buried when the curtain goes up; and the audience soon knows that his widow and her lover have murdered him. And somebody else knows it too—in fact, writes the murderers an anonymous letter saying so. They thereupon bump off the man they imagine wrote it—only to get another anonymous letter and have to start again from scratch. In the end—but, this being a mystery play, I must confine myself to saying that the end is ingenious.

There's nothing very wrong with the ingredients of *Portrait in Black*; nothing really unprofessional about the handling. It's just, taken as a whole, too tame. This is partly because of its being too talky; of its slowing down the action and watering the thrills. But there's also, I think, something wrong with the tone of the play; something chilly without being chilling. We watch it, as it were, from a great distance, in too uninvolved a mood. We don't take sides. We don't get agitated. We don't worry about any one's well being.

Reginald Denham has staged the play smoothly enough, and Donald Oenslager has provided a luxurious set. And Miss Luce, Donald Cook and Sidney Blackmer perform the leading roles competently—though Miss Luce's behavior is a touch grand for a mere thriller. But somehow no one (except Thomas Coley, as a youthful labor leader) ever seems very human.

—Louis Kronenberger

The New York Times

MAY 15, 1947

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Some grisly episodes are acted in an astonishingly cultured style in "Portrait in Black," put on at the Booth last evening. This is the shudder charade by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts which has been glowering at Broadway for a long time and has finally got inside a theatre. To present it in high style the producers have persuaded Claire Luce, late Becky Sharp in London, to come home and slink through five scenes in some smart black frocks and bizarre make-up.

* * *

Miss Luce is a very remarkable actress who has had a notable career and can act with virtuosity. Caught in a mood of dragon-lidded grief, she is acting a psychopathic woman of passion with imagination and skill. If the part of the lethal Tanis Talbot were not claptrap, Miss Luce's performance would doubtless seem magnificent in a frightening vein of black sorcery. But Tanis is basically a pain in the neck; and, as in the recent case of Mady Christians and "Message for Margaret," the deliberate artistry of Miss Luce's acting becomes embarrassing. "Portrait in Black" might be less exasperating if it were acted more in the squalid style of "Heads or Tails."

For it is to be feared that Mr. Goff and Mr. Roberts have overwritten a sophomoric thriller. When the curtain rises, Mrs. Talbot's husband, a tremendous shipping magnate, has just been buried. He is not being mourned enthusiastically. For Mrs. Talbot has been snuggling down with her husband's doctor out of hours, and she has been a willing accessory to her husband's murder. The drama records the trouble she and the doctor have in concealing their secret. It takes five scenes of serious writing in a solemn style to sweep them on to a respectable dramatic doom. By the end of the evening it is difficult for a theatregoer to go on caring.

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If "Portrait in Black" were written in collaboration by Ibsen and Strindberg it could hardly have a finer production. To house its abominations, Donald Oenslager has designed one of those handsome living rooms that make wealth and high living eminently desirable. Under Reginald Denham's competent direction, Sidney Blackmer is acting a scoundrel with gentlemanly dexterity. Donald Cook as the unstrung lover plays a murderer with exquisite charm. You will find nothing vulgar in their acting, despite the low tastes they have for blackmail and homicide.

As a pair of honest lovers, Dorothea Jackson and Thomas Coley are casual and refreshing. Mary Michael and Barry Kelley make the servants agreeable; and little David Anderson is giving an acceptable performance of a boy neglected by the playwrights as well as his mother.

With so splendid a set and such a covey of actors it would be pleasant to see something good by Somerset Maugham on the stage of the Booth this week. They are acting the wrong play. "Portrait in Black" is the only impediment to an entertaining evening.

'PORTRAIT IN BLACK.'

Play by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts; staged by Reginald Denham; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Helene Pons; presented by David Lowe and Edgar F. Luckenbach at the Booth Theater, Wednesday evening, May 14, 1947. The cast:

Tanis Talbot	Claire Luce
Gracie McPhee	Mary Michael
Peter Talbot	David Anderson
Winifred Talbot	Dorothea Jackson
Cob O'Brien	Barry Kelley
Rupert Marlowe	Sidney Blackmer
Dr. Philip Graham	Donald Cook
Blake Ritchie	Thomas Coley

SYNOPSIS: The entire action of the play takes place in the drawing room of the Talbot home in San Francisco. Act I—Scene 1: An autumn afternoon. Scene 2: The following morning. Act II—Scene 1: Three nights later. Scene 2: Three days later, afternoon. Act III—The same night.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

MAY 15, 1947

By HOWARD BARNES

Vernal Bore

MURDER has rarely been made more uninteresting on the stage than it is in "Portrait in Black." The Ivan Goff-Ben Roberts essay on homicide at the Booth has a ripple of excitement as a more or less innocent bystander gets plugged midway through the proceedings. It has a rather tricky denouement, in which bloody-handed lovers get caught in a trap of their own devising. The rest of a supposed evening's entertainment is given over to a pother of inane dialogue and uncomfortable posturings. Despite the efforts of such veteran artificers as Claire Luce, Donald Cook and Sidney Blackmer, "Portrait in Black" is a vernal bore.

* * *

The authors of this mishap must have fancied that they were composing a psychological melodrama of some depth and subtlety. For five scenes they hold their microscope over a doctor and his mistress, who has been widowed by their deft use of a lethal hypodermic. Unfortunately, the glass is so cloudy that the figures, instead of being magnified, are barely recognizable. Warned that their guilty secret is shared by a third person, they start liquidating every one who wanders on stage and makes a suspicious gesture. As they discus their predicament the script abounds in such rhetorical questions as "what love is this that feeds on death?" Whatever it is, they can have it.

* * *

As though the play itself were not enough of a hurdle for the company, Reginald Denham has underlined its sluggishness so emphatically in his staging that it is a wonder at times that the whole action does not freeze in a tableau vivant. Miss Luce, returning from triumphs abroad, slinks around in a death mask make-up, trying to be both evil and fascinating. Too frequently she is merely sinister in the manner of a third-rate horror film. Cook, as the suave slayer of the lady's ship-owner husband, registers more horror at his inamorata's checkered past than fear that his murders will out. What little suspense there is in the show drains through their fingers like sand.

* * *

Somewhat better is Sidney Blackmer as the unfortunate ex-lover of the widow, who gets his come-uppance without the slightest notion of what all the commotion is about. Dorothea Jackson is reasonably believable as the harrassed step-daughter of the modern Borgia, although her romance with a maritime union organizer is dragged in out of nowhere for no apparent dramatic purpose, unless it is to stuff up some of the gaping holes in the work. Donald Oenslager's setting and the Helen Pons costumes for Miss Claire are worthy of more theatrical excitement than you will find at the Booth.

New York Post

MAY 15, 1947

'Portrait in Black' New Murder Drama

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Being an ardent admirer of homicide in the theatre, the cinema and the detective story, this reviewer has long been of the conviction that even a fair stage murder is better than no stage murder at all. It used to be that the drama was pretty skillful about providing melodramas replete with slick assassinations, but of late it has been less adept in this interesting field, no doubt suspecting that the outside world was too expert a rival to be challenged. Anyway, I feel that my favorite art form has been remiss in a subject wherein it once shone, and was all for welcoming "Portrait in Black," when it arrived at the Booth Theatre last night.

However, at the end of the two murders and the promise of a couple of more violent deaths to come, which Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, the authors, have arranged for us, I was of mixed emotions. "Portrait in Black" has some excellent moments of suspense, a few pleasant episodes of excitement and a couple of promising melodramatic ideas, but it has its dull spaces, too, and, somehow or other, it never manages to achieve the sort of ingenious and amiably spine-tingling twists which are so important to such a work.

Skillful Promises

While the authors are skillful enough to keep their audience expecting the proper kind of surprise or poetic justice or ironic turn of plot, they are not equally successful at delivering. It is agreeable enough, at the end, to find the wickedest of the melodrama's malefactors safely trapped, but somehow the trap is not sardonic enough to be theatrically satisfying. As a connoisseur of such things, I likewise found the one on-stage murder less effective than the building up to it had promised.

Not to be too cryptic about it, "Portrait in Black" begins with the sorrowful widow of the West Coast shipping magnate and the young doctor who has had the misfortune to lose a patient, and then goes on with the interesting revelation that they have done away with an embarrassing husband. Since that is just the beginning of the play, the course of crime does not run smooth. There is a blackmail note, and the guilty lovers decide that another killing is necessary to save them. For a time they try to blame it on the CIO, but you may be sure that this nefarious plot is foiled.

Some good actors have rather a trying time endeavoring to make the homicidal activities credible. I never quite believed in Claire Luce and Donald Cook as murderers or in Sidney Blackmer as a man who may or may not be a blackmailer, and that proved a handicap to their expert playing. I thought the most convincing performances were those of Dorothea Jackson as an ingenue, Barry Kelley as a dubious Irish chauffeur, and David Anderson as an unhappy child.

"Portrait in Black" has moments that writers of melodrama should be proud of, but it fails to live up to its promise.

Journal American

MAY 15, 1947

Not a Who-Dun-It —It's a 'So What'

By ROBERT GARLAND

They do say that "Portrait in Black" reads better than it acts. Could be! Not having read it I wouldn't know. But I do know that there must be more to it than meets the ear in its latest reproduction. This new staging at the Booth is its third here in America, to say nothing of its English replica with Diana Wynyard as the lovely lady killer who almost always gets her man.

Producers don't produce and reproduce a play, movie men don't pay $100,000 for the picture rights, without some sort of reason. Those good things having happened to "Portrait in Black" before it reached Broadway, I'd like to know just why. Visually, it fills the eye with Donald Oenslager's elegant San Francisco penthouse and Claire Luce's elegant Manhattan clothes. But, aurally—

Well, aurally, it fills the ear with idle conversation leading up to, then down from, a Hollywooden big scene that never quite comes off. It never quite comes off because Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts have written in their characters, endowing them with almost everything but a third dimension. Contrary to rumor, "Portrait in Black" is no "who-dun-it." It's a so-what instead!

• • •

Self-Made Widow

The lovely lady killer who almost always gets her man is—and my typewriter isn't lisping—Tanis Talbot. When the curtain rises on her elegant West Coast penthouse, Tanis has already done Mr. Talbot in. With the help of a Dr. Graham's needle, she has made herself a widow. So guilty is her aspect, so slinky is her stroll, that you take her for a murderess before she says a word.

Complications most certainly ensue with Tanis Talbot worrying away in the presence of her family, friends and servants. In the ensuing complications are a Scotch maid, an Irish butler, an American laborite, a dastardly doctor, a loving lawyer and a red-haired little boy who's not his father's son. A second killing follows this one right up on stage.

Here I must leave you in suspense, for there's a drama critic's oath which precludes the spilling of a mystery melodrama's beans. Even when the mystery isn't mysterious and the drama isn't dramatic, a reviewer can't tell who done it in next day's review. I won't, at any rate. I wouldn't tell you even if I happened to remember. In "Portrait in Black," I don't.

• • •

Meaning in Doubt

But I do remember Claire Luce's performance as Tanis Talbot, the beautiful bumper-off of the San Francisco rooftops. To report that it's curious is to report the truth. From where I sat at the Booth, I couldn't make out what Miss Luce thought she was up to. Her every little movement had a meaning of its own. Confidentially from curtain rise to curtain fall, she slinks.

With the happy exceptions of Sidney Blackmer and Thomas Coley, the entire cast seems equally confused. But Mr. Blackmer brings skill and humor to the loving lawyer called Rupert Marlowe. Shot at and missed, then shot at and hit, he fades from the picture two scenes too soon. But Mr. Coley, as the American laborite, hangs on until the end. He, too, plays with skill and humor.

Maybe, in its next production, the hidden appeal of this Ivan Goff-Ben Roberts play will be visible to this play-reporter's eyes. I still think here must be something in it only a Broadway producer or a Hollywood movie-man can see. At the Booth, the new exposure is no more clarifying than its predecessors. A "psychological murder melodrama," "Portrait in Black" is neither psychological nor melodramatic. Which leaves us with murder on our hands.

The Sun

MAY 15, 1947

'Portrait in Black,' New Murder Play, Is Quite Artificial and Unbelievable.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

There was sex in the Booth Theater last night, and also murder, but the play in which they're put together isn't very much. "Portrait in Black," written by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, offers excitement only intermittently. Its faults lie in its artificial characters, its tiresome scenes between climaxes, its generally lifeless and labored writing.

The sinister Tanis Talbot and her doctor lover murder her wealthy husband. A letter arrives congratulating her upon the crime and the doctor decides that the sender, when found, must also be put away. He and his blond mistress then shoot the lawyer with whom she had an earlier romance, and who is the father of her child. A second congratulatory letter reveals that they've killed the wrong man.

The finish, in respect to the rules relating to the telling of mystery play plots, must be left undisclosed. But I feel free to admit that, midway in the proceedings, I guessed the identity of the letter writer by a process of elimination—there are only eight characters in the play—and as a result of a long association with murder thrillers, going back to Owen Davis's "At 9:45."

The one high-powered scene in "Portrait in Black," a scene that is genuinely creepy and melodramatically effective, comes at the close of the first of the two acts when the doctor, gun in hand, comes through the tall windows to get his man, having missed in his attempt at the boulevard stop light. But in the second act "Portrait in Black" falls off again into dreary and interminable interludes, into fumbling and floundering and hopeless playwriting.

Claire Luce, to be remembered for her vivid playing in "Of Mice and Men," returns from huge overseas success to create the role of the hellish Tanis, of the uncontrollable passion for the handsome doctor. Miss Luce, in slinky black gowns and seeming to have just stepped out of the Bergdorf Goodman window, is given to considerable posturing, but she manages most of her scenes skillfully. If she is seldom believable, I blame the playwrights.

Donald Cook, with his forceful, jerky, sententious playing, makes you listen to his scenes. He is often an actor who gives more to a line and a scene than he has received from the author. Sidney Blackmer is bland, easy-going, time-taking in a skimpy role. Dorothea Jackson is an acceptable ingenue, and Thomas Coley is quite good as a young labor organizer. Donald Oenslager has designed another of his fascinating interiors, and Reginald Denham, in his direction, has helped the play along as much as any director could.

"Portrait in Black" is chill and shudder drama in slow motion. It has some tense moments, but it is often gabby to the point of tediousness. And you really never care about what happens to the psychopathic Tanis and her luckless lover.

New York World-Telegram

MAY 15, 1947

'Portrait in Black' Comes Out with Blur

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night's entry of the theatrical season, "Portrait in Black," suggests James Cain in a drawing room. Reminiscent of what has become a familiar school of movies, it is a mental exercise in unsnarling the complications that follow the murder of a man by his wife and her lover.

The viciousness that has characterized pictures on this subject is replaced by a dreamy neuroticism on the stage. Although the basic story is straightforward, it is here told with a baffling wealth of plot.

If one were not kept so busy sorting the story threads, the controlling twist of the play should be obvious by a simple process of elimination. As a matter of fact it never faintly suggested itself to this reviewer until it was blurted out by a character with a knee in his stomach.

One Letter, One Murder.

Tanis, a shipowner's widow, is in love with the doctor who helped her to kill her husband, and is loved by a lawyer who manages the husband's estate.

An anonymous letter informs the guilty pair that the crime is known. To protect themselves they commit another murder, and shortly afterwards another letter turns up. The solution comes out in one of the split-second but reasonable coincidences which thicken the play all the way through.

The suspense of this portrait is almost entirely a matter of hairs' breadths. If the characters opened a door a second later, or pulled a curtain, or dropped an unimportant remark, the game would be up.

Chauffer is Menace.

There is a young love story between the dead man's daughter and a labor organizer who is fighting the ship line. It is written with no particular color, but the two characters serve to complicate matters in various ways.

There is a child whose paternity is doubtful for a while, and a chauffeur who manages to be ominous. The only person unencumbered with plot implications, as long as she stays away from the curtains, is a forthright Scotch maid.

Claire Luce plays the central figure of Tanis, a lady of Gordian mental processes. She moves beautifully like the dancer she is. Miss Luce also has an arresting habit of never doing or saying anything the way you expect her to, or the way anyone else would. It may not be great acting but it certainly engages your attention.

Lawyer Has Pull.

Donald Cook is her paramour, and plays in as straight a manner as possible, a character who has a different face for each person he speaks to.

Sidney Blackmer makes the lawyer so attractive that one wonders if the casting of these parts should not have been switched.

"Portrait in Black" is the sort of play that most uninhibited mystery fans should have a high old time with. They will not mind the frequently drowsy motivation, or the timely accidents which make casual things done by one person create a matter of life or death to another.

There is plenty of food for popular psychiatric analysis here. It is interesting that such matters of murder and muddy mentality, which have served pictures so constantly for the last few years, should turn up so seldom in the theater.

There is however, one original hole in the dike here that not even a C picture scripter would be unlikely to plug.

Tanis' husband has been a bedridden invalid. She is quite comfortably carrying on with his doctor, a setup that could not be easier to explain. Just why they chose to kill the husband, and start all this particular hell for themselves is something only a woman of Tanis' lugubrious temperament could explain.